Jewish Culture in the Formative Period of Islam

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The prophet Muhammad lived to witness the success of Islam in Arabia by the time of his death in 632, C.E. Initially, however, he failed to win his fellow Arabs to Islam in Mecca, the pagan city of his birth. In fact, Muhammad's prophetic activities and behavior made him *persona non grata* in his native city; he was forced out of town in 622 and found success only after having made his great *hijra* or Emigration to Medina, a large agricultural settlement populated by many Jews as well as other inhabitants who practiced the indigenous religious traditions of Arabia. It would be Medina where Islam would take hold. Medina would also serve as the crucible wherein would be forged the complex relations between Jews and Muslims and between Judaism and Islam.

The conversion of Rabbi Abdullah

A story is told by Muhammad ibn Isḥāq, the eighth century biographer of the prophet Muhammad, of the latter's coming to Medina.[1]

> This is the story of Abdullah ibn Salām, the learned rabbi,[2] that one of his kinsmen told me about his conversion to Islam. [Abdullah] said: When I heard about the Apostle of God, I knew from his description, name, and time [of his appearance], that he was the one we were expecting. I was overjoyed about this but kept it to myself until the Apostle of God arrived in Medina. While he was staying in [the Medinan neighborhood of] Qubā' among the Banū `Amr b. `Awf, a man came with the news of his arrival while I was working at the top of a date tree with my aunt Khālida bint. al-Ḥārith sitting below. When I heard the news of his arrival I called out: "*Allahu Akbar*!" When my aunt heard this she said to me: "My goodness! If Moses ibn. `Imrān [That is, the Moses of the Bible -- see Exodus 6:20] had come you would not have become more excited." I replied: "O aunt! By God, he is the brother of Moses ibn `Imrān and of the same religion, having been sent on the same mission." She exclaimed: "O nephew! Is he the prophet whom we have been told will be sent at this hour? " I answered: "Yes!" and she responded: "Then this is it!" I immediately went to the Apostle of God and became a Muslim. Then I returned to my family and ordered them to become Muslims as well.
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> I kept my conversion hidden from the Jews and went to the Apostle of God and said: "O Apostle of God, the Jews are a people of lies. Will you take me into your house and hide me from them? Then ask them about me and they will tell you what they think of me before they know I have become Muslim, because if they know [that I converted], they will falsely denounce me." So the Apostle of God put me in a room. [Some Jews] entered and began chatting. He asked them: "In your opinion, what kind of a person is Al-Ḥuṣayn ibn Salām?" They answered: "[He is] our master and prince, our learned rabbi." When they had finished I came out to them and said: "O Jews, be reverent to God and accept what has come from Him, for by God, you know that this is the Apostle of God. You have found his description and his name written in the Torah. I bear witness that he is the Apostle of God. I believe in him, pronounce him true, and acknowledge him." They said: "You are lying!" and slandered me. So I said to the Apostle of God: "Did I not tell you that they are a people of lies, deceit and perfidy?" I then publicly revealed my conversion and the conversion of my family, and my aunt Khālida also became a good Muslim.

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[1] *Al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (Beirut, n.d.), 1:516-17; translated by Alfred Guillaume as *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1955), 241-2.

[2] *ḥabr `ālim*. The Arabic term, *ḥabr*, is simply the Arabic pronunciation of the Talmudic title, *ḥaver* or learned scholar [Bava Batra 75a: "*ḥaverim* are none other than *talmidey ḥachamim*"].

Although this apocryphal story cannot be accepted without corroboration as an accurate witness to the particular event it describes,[3] it contains within it important incidental data about Jews living in the environs and period of emerging Islam. We learn that the Jews had scholarly religious leaders to whom they referred as *ḥaver*, and who worked in the local economy. Jews were involved in the date agriculture of the region and worked alongside their extended family kin, including women. Our story, like many others about Arabian Jews of this period, teaches us that both Jewish men and women had Arabic names. It is likely that al-Ḥuṣayn was Abdullah's "Jewish" name before he became a Muslim and took on the epithet, "servant of Allah" (*Abdullah*), a common Islamic "conversion name." While Abdullah's expression of amazement, "Allah is most great!" (*Allahu akbar*) is most likely a later Islamic interpolation, it is possible that Arabic speaking Jews in this early period as well as in later centuries referred to their God as *Allah* [the famous Sa`dia Ga`on (d.942), for example, the most brilliant scholar of the geonic period, regularly referred to God in his Arabic commentary as Allah]. And perhaps of greatest interest here, as will become clearer below, Arabian Jews spoke of the coming of a "prophet," some even predicting the hour of his coming based on biblical interpretation.

This famous story of Abdullah ibn Salām's conversion to Islam, like many other stories about Muhammad and his interaction with Jews found in the earliest Islamic sources, is not an objective historical report but, rather, in the form we have it, a literary composition -- a tale or legend. Despite its unreliability as a factual report of the specific event it purportedly describes, however, it and other such tales contain fine and often detailed historical and cultural information that is repeated with subtle and nuanced variations in a great many other early Arabic sources and references. This quality of the early Arabic sources allows, therefore, for a guarded confidence in the historicity of certain of the data contained within them.

Our tale, along with many others, depicts the Jews living in Arabia during Islam's emergence as veteran inhabitants of the peninsula and deeply integrated into Arabian culture and civilization. The Jews are described both as Jews and as Arabs, and they are depicted as having been organized and acting according to indigenous Arabian paradigms of social organization and behavior. It is not easy to define the boundaries of identification that separated Jews from other inhabitants of Arabia, for they not only lived among their own in "Jewish" tribes, but were also members of tribes not referred to in the sources as being specifically Jewish. Moreover, the Jews of Arabia appear not to have been physically distinguishable from the indigenous Arabs, many of whom consider themselves to have derived originally from the biblical Ishmael.[4] Arabian Jews spoke Arabic even among themselves, although there is evidence that at least some of them spoke a particular Jewish dialect referred to in Arabic sources as "Jewish" (*yahūdiyya*), perhaps a Jewish dialect of Arabic similar in role to Yiddish as a Jewish dialect of Medieval German. Jewish professions mirrored those of the larger civilization in which they lived, with Jewish farmers, craftsmen and even Bedouin, and the Jews could arm and protect themselves just as other tribal groups in the region. In fact, the Jews of sixth-seventh century Arabia appear so highly integrated economically, ethnically and geographically into the local culture that they must be considered culturally or ethnically Arab, just as the Jews of Babylonia speaking Babylonian Aramaic were so deeply integrated into their local culture that they would refer to themselves as Babylonians.

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[3] Its strongly polemical nature should immediately raise caution regarding its historicity. See A. J. Wensinck, Muhammad and the Jews of Medina (Berlin: Adiyok, 1982); R. Firestone "The Failure of a Jewish Program of Public Satire in the Squares of Medina," Judaism, Winter, 1997, 438-452; W. M. Watt, "The Condemnation of the Jews of Banū Qurayẓah," Muslim World 42 (1952), 160-171; G. Newby, "The Sīrah as a Source for Arabian Jewish History: Problems and Perspectives," JSAI 7 (1986), 121-138.

[4] According to classical Arabian genealogies, the "original Arabs" (*al-`arab al-`āriba*) have died out, while the "arabized Arabs" (*al-`arab al-musta`riba*) derive from non-indigenous tribes who assimilated Arabian culture and language after migrating into the Arabian Peninsula (G. Rentz, "Djazirat al-`Arab", *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, 1:543-6.). Many contemporary Arabian tribes, include the Quraysh tribe from which Muhammad derived, traces its ancestry to Ishmael, whom Abraham brought to Arabia (cf. Genesis chapter 21).

At the same time that the Jewish communities that penetrated Arabia became "arabized" through language, customs and even personal names, however, so too did indigenous Arabian civilization come under the influence of Judaism. One pre-Islamic term for a high god in the old Arabian pantheon, for example, was *al-Raḥmān,* "the Merciful One", exactly equivalent to the Jewish Aramaic *Raḥmānā* that occurs in the Babylonian Talmud more than 250 times. Christian communities also made their way into Arabia, and many religious or cultic terms that became a part of Islam derive from Aramaic Jewish or Christian religious terminology that was applied to pre-Islamic Arabian religion.[5]

As these and other examples to follow will make clear, the cultural and even religious influence between Jews and Arabs and Jews and Muslims flowed in both directions, but despite the bi-directionality of cultural influence during the pre-Islamic period, the Jews were known as monotheists in a region renown for being overwhelmingly polytheistic. Whether or not these Jews practiced one or more expressions of Judaism found also in the Land of Israel, Babylonia or in highly Hellenized areas has not yet been determined. So too, the relationship between Arabian Jewry and the still-mysterious and possibly monotheistic religion of the pre-Islamic Arabian *ḥanīf*s also remains unclear. Nevertheless, the sources clearly differentiate Jewish Arabs from other pre-Islamic Arabs when concerned with religious beliefs and practice.

On the other hand, the boundary between Arabian Judaism and the emerging Islam of the first Islamic century is not clear. Muhammad himself fully expected the Jews of Arabia to become Muslims as well -- to be "submitters" (the meaning of the term, "Muslim") to the will of God as articulated in the qur`ānic revelations that he heard and recited. That most Arabian Jews did not submit was a shock to Muhammad, for he believed during his initial period in Medina that the religion he preached, in apposition to the indigenous Arabian polytheisms of his generation, was virtually synonymous with the monotheism of the Jews. In fact, the story of earliest Islam is, in large part, a story of an emerging identity constantly being tested by the tension between God's word and the reality of a world, including the world of Arabian Jews, not easily willing to accept it. The ambiguous cultural and religious boundaries between Arabian Jews and other Arabs in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia, therefore, established a series of tensions that would epitomize the foundational relationship between Jews and Muslims. These tensions are the center point around which the cultural history of the Jews in Islamic lands must be written.

Arab conquests first, Islamization afterward

As mentioned previously, Muhammad was initially unsuccessful in Mecca, but he succeeded brilliantly in Medina, and his success eventually spread back to his home town and much of Arabia before his death in 632. These initial successes were followed in the century after his death by a series of brilliant and extraordinary military conquests that took the world by surprise. Rising up out of an obscure desert region, physically near to the world empires of Byzantium and Persia but light-years distant from these empires in their level of civilization, the Arabs overwhelmed both within a decade. From the first Byzantine defeat at Ajnadayn in 634 to the fall of Alexandria in 643 and the last of the great Persian cities in 644, the Arabs found themselves in control of the center of world civilization. Damascus, Jerusalem, Caesarea, Edessa, Ctesiphon the capital of Persia, and then onward to the east toward India, from Alexandria and Babylon of Egypt westward across North Africa and eventually, Spain, and north from Arabia to the very gates of Constantinople itself.

These were the conquests of Arabs. Because Islam as a religious civilization was still in formation during the early conquests, it is still uncertain what of Islam the first conquerors knew

[5] Many of these were absorbed into Islam. For a listing of foreign religious vocabulary found in the Qur'ān, see Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1938). Christian communities also lived in Arabia during this period, and they also contributed cultic and religious terminology to what would emerge as Islam. See Spencer Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London: Longman, 1979); F. E. Peters, *Arabia Before Islam* (London: Variorum, forthcoming).

and believed. It would soon become clear to the world that the triumphant Arabs also represented a new religion that would forever change the entire world constellation of religious civilizations, but the early conquests were Arab conquests in which Arab believers, other followers of Muhammad, pagans, and even Arab Jews and Christians took part.[6] Emerging Islam was one of the powerful motivators of the huge movement of peoples and energy that would come to dominate much of world history for the next millennium, but Islam was still in the process of formation during the great Arab expansion. The Qur'ān itself, for example, was not "collected" or canonized until the caliphate of Uthman (644-656), who rose to the position of caliph twelve years after Muhammad's death and only after the Arab conquest of most of the Middle East.[7] Neither had the great compendia of Islamic law and tradition been formulated nor the theologies systematized during the first century or more after the death of Muhammad. Islam was in the process of emerging, and like the butterfly that emerges in glory from its cramped chrysalis, it would take time for the life-sustaining fluids to flow through the expanding arteries of the empire and bring the necessary energy and sustenance to allow it to take off.

This was the formative age of Islam, when Islam was busy not only managing an empire, but also defining itself. During the two centuries following the death of the Prophet in 632, the major literatures, theologies, and institutions of Islam would be established. It was during this foundational period, and especially the early decades, that Jews would have a profound impact on the emergence of Islam. Soon afterwards, Islam would stamp its own legacy on the evolution of Judaism.

Ancient Jews enter Arabia

Exactly when Jews had penetrated the Arabian peninsula remains a mystery, but Arab legend suggests as early as the Exodus from Egypt when Moses sent a contingent of soldiers deep into Arabia to fight the Amalekites living there. According to the tenth century *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, the Israelite soldiers destroyed their enemy and eventually settled in the area known as the Hijaz, the very region in which are situated the towns of Mecca and Medina, the foundation sites of earliest Islam. Other legends associate the migration of Jews to the region in the wake of Roman persecution, a far more likely scenario. Jewish communities were not only established in the oasis towns of the Hijaz in west-central Arabia, but also in the southern region that is now within the borders of the modern state of Yemen. Yemenite Jews credit their origins with the famous story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, where to this day one of the regional areas of Yemen is called by its Arabic equivalent, *Saba*. According to this tradition, the queen returned to her native land with a son fathered by Solomon. Solomon, in turn, sent Jews to settle in Yemen in order to have his son properly educated.

The true origin of the Jewish communities of Arabia may never be determined, but we have noted from the story of Abdullah ibn Salām how they were a significant part of the Arabian landscape by the birth of Muhammad in 570. The Jews of Medina, for example (which was called Yathrib prior to Islam), were the dominant community of the town until shortly before Muhammad's birth. In the town of Taymā', about halfway between Medina and the great Nabatean center of Petra in today's Jordan, the Jews are said to have been powerful enough to insist that non-Jewish Arab tribes interested in settling in the town adopt Judaism.

The Jews of sixth-seventh century Arabia were highly integrated into Arabian culture -- so much so, in fact, that it is often difficult to determine whether a person referred to in the sources is

[6] S. D. Goitein, "Jewish Issues in *Kitab Ansāb al-Ashrāf* of al-Balādhurī," (Hebrew), in *Tzion* 1 (1936), 76.

[7] Earlier attempts at established an authoritative text may have occurred earlier, such as the "collection" under the first caliph, Abu Bakr, but even that under Uthman was not conclusive. The primitive nature of Arabic orthography and various "readings" or different ways of pronouncing the words continued to plague the Muslims, and some modern scholars question the traditional account of the collection and canonization of the Qur'ān altogether. For a synopsis of the traditional Islamic view with minor criticisms, see Bell and Watt, Introduction to the Qur'ān (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970).

Jewish or not unless specifically noted by the sources themselves. Jews tended to take on Arab names and adopt Arabian cultural practices. The famous pre-Islamic Arabian poet, al-Samaw'al b. `Ādiyā, who lived in the mid-sixth century is a classic example of deep Jewish integration into Arabian culture. His own name, Samaw'al, is an Arabized form of Samuel, but the name of his father is purely Arabian. It is assumed by some scholars, therefore, that only his mother was Jewish, although many other Jews in the period seem to have taken on equally Arabian names. Al-Samaw'al's fame as a pre-Islamic Arabian poet denotes his deep integration into Arabian civilization, for this ancient art form is considered the most sublime form of indigenous Arabian culture. Unfortunately, there remains considerable controversy regarding the poems attributed to him. Some contain material reflecting Jewish ideas, but these have not been considered genuine by many scholars. Other poems that seem more likely to be composed by Samaw'al himself contain no indication of Jewish background. On the other hand, tradition associates him quite strongly with Judaism, along with the tradition that his grandson converted to Islam after the rise of Muḥammad as Prophet.

Al-Samaw'al's greatest fame, however, derives from his celebrated loyalty rather than his poetry. The legend of his absolute fidelity has become proverbial in Arabic: "more loyal than al-Samaw'al." According to the story, Imru' al-Qays, one of pre-Islamic Arabia's greatest poets and the youngest son of the last king of the Kinda, led an unsettled life as an adventurer. Included among his exploits was the attempt to avenge the assassination of his father. He eventually lost his allies and sought refuge from his pursuers by appealing to the hospitality of al-Samaw'al, who lived in a famous and impenetrable castle called Ablaq (one legend claims that it was built by Solomon himself!). Al-Samaw'al recommended Imru' al-Qays to a Arab client king of the Byzantine emperor, who received him. Imru' al-Qays asked al-Samaw'al to guard his daughter, his paternal inheritance, and his famous family armor for the duration of his journey, to which al-Samaw'al agreed. When Imru' al-Qays' enemies learned that his famous armor was under al-Samaw'al's protection, they besieged the castle with a great army. Al-Samaw'al refused to release anything of Imru' al-Qays to his enemies, even after they managed to capture al-Samaw'al's son and threatened to kill him. He persisted in refusing to betray his trust despite witnessing the death of his own son before his very eyes. The besiegers eventually withdrew without achieving their purpose, the result of which al-Samaw'al's fidelity became legendary.

Although the historicity of this legend must be regarded with scepticism, it provides interesting cultural information relevant to the period just prior to the emergence of Islam. Such traits as hospitality, loyalty and betrayal, use of armor and fortified castles, political alliances and expectations of vengeance all correspond quite well with other information representing the period. That a Jew should be located in the midst of such a legend is not surprising considering their position in pre-Islamic Arabia and their level of integration into the Arabian world.

Just as Arabian Jews absorbed and assimilated Arabian culture prior to the emergence of Islam, so too did they infuse Jewish or Biblical culture into the indegenous cultures of Arabia. The nebulous boundaries between "Jewishness" and "Arabness" did not interfere with the transmission of culture in both directions. Perhaps the most profound example of Jewish cultural infusion is that of the many biblical legends, ideas and personages that had penetrated deeply into Arabia already in pre-Islamic times. Biblical stories circulated among Jews and Christians living in the region and were naturally and unselfconsciously shared with neighbors who were unfamiliar with the Bible. Many of these stories, which themselves originated as oral midrashic interpretations or explanations of biblical texts, were told and retold as part of normal human interaction at trading fairs and tribal or regional gatherings and celebrations. Transmitted orally, the stories naturally evolved to fit the specific contexts of their individual recitations as they were passed from person to person and place to place, thereby unfolding into forms that conformed to local traditions. Many of these stories, therefore, like their Jewish or Christian bearers, thereby became "arabized" as they naturally blended into the local topography and folklore traditions of the region. As a result of this sharing and fusing of traditions, unique Arabian legends began to emerge that reflected both biblical and indigenous Arabian heritage. Some of these pre-Islamic Arabian legends incorporating biblical themes and characters would then be absorbed into the

religious civilization of Islam which grew out of the cultures of pre-Islamic Arabia. Some of the "Islamized" legends would later even be re-absorbed back into the literary corpus of Judaism.

The legend of Abraham visiting Ishmael

One classic example of "arabization" is the story of Abraham's visits to Ishmael, found in both Jewish and Islamic literature. The Jewish rendering of the legend is a midrash or interpretive reading of Genesis chapter 21, where Hagar and Ishmael are banished from the Abraham tribe and left alone and defenseless in the desert. Such behavior would hardly seem befitting of the great Jewish patriarch, known in Jewish legend for his hospitality and care for the stranger. A series of Jewish narrative interpretations therefore grew up to try to make sense of the difficult biblical passage. One midrashic interpretive reading of Genesis 21:21 suggests that Abraham did not really abandon his own son, but visited him regularly in order to ensure his viability and well-being.[8]

> [Gen.21:21]: **And [Ishmael] lived in the wilderness of Paran.** Ishmael took a wife from Arvot Mo'av whose name was `Ayefa.[9] After three years, Abraham went to see his son Ishmael and swore to Sarah that he would not dismount from his camel at Ishmael's abode. When he arrived there at midday, he found Ishmael's wife. He asked: "Where is Ishmael?" She answered: "He and his mother went to bring the fruit of date trees from the desert." He said: "Give me a little bread and water, for my soul is faint from the desert journey."[10] She answered: "There is no bread and no water." He then said to her: "When Ishmael comes [home], tell him this. Say that an old man came from the Land of Canaan to see you, and that the threshold of the house is not good." When Ishmael came [home], his wife told him what he said. [Ishmael then] sent her out, and his mother sent for a wife from her father's house, whose name was Fatumah.[11]
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> Again, after three years, Abraham went to see his son Ishmael and swore to Sarah as the first time that he would not dismount from his camel at Ishmael's abode. When he arrived there at midday, he found Ishmael's [new] wife. He asked: "Where is Ishmael?" She answered: "He and his mother went to tend the camels in the desert." He said to her: "Give me a little bread and water, for my soul is faint from the journey," so she brought it out and gave it to him. Abraham stood and prayed before the Holy One for his son, and Ishmael's home was filled with all good things and blessings. When Ishmael came [home], his wife told him what he said, and Ishmael knew that his father's compassion was still extended to him, as it is said [Psalm 103:] **As a father has compassion for his children**.[12]

This Jewish legend depicts a compassionate Abraham who, unwilling to abandon his own flesh and blood to the vicissitudes of the desert (see Genesis 21), personally ensured the viability of his son and progeny. The threshhold to Ishmael's home symbolizes Ishmael's wife and mother of his offspring. Abraham, the father of many nations (Genesis 17:5-6), ensures through this story that Ishmael's wife is a fitting matriarch of the Ishmaelite Arab line. The names of Ishmael's wives clearly indicate Islamic influence since they each duplicate the name of one of Muhammad's wives or daughters. The Muslim names do not suggest an Islamic origin of the story however,

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[8] The earliest complete narrative, reproduced here, is found in *Pirqey Rabbi Eli`ezer* (Warsaw edition with commentary of David Luria), chapter 30, a work that was redacted in its present form after the emergence of Islam and which contains Islamic influence, but which is made up mostly of pre-Islamic material. An English translation (of a different manuscript) of PRE was made by Gerald Friedlander, *Pirkey De Rabbi Eliezer* (London: 1916 and reprinted, NY: Sepher-Hermon, 1981), 218-19. A more embellished rendering may be found in the later *Sefer HaYashar* (Tel Aviv: Alter-Bergman, 1980), 55-56.

[9] The *Targum Pseudo-Yonatan* (Gen.21:21) has "`Adisha." Most likely added to an earlier narrative core, these allusions to the name of Muhammad's beloved wife, "`Ayyishah," date its final redaction to after the emergence of Islam,

[10] Note the *double entendre* in the words, *`ayefā nafshī* ("my soul is faint") in relation to the name `Ayefa.

[11] *Targum Pseudo-Yonatan* (ibid) has Fatima, which is the name of Muhammad's daughter.

[12] In the continuation of this story, Abraham also demonstrates his continuing love for Hagar by taking her back after Sarah's death. Traditional commentaries from the targums to Rashi suggest that Abraham's wife, Qeturah, named in Genesis 25:1, was none other than Hagar.

because the nature of the tale indicates a Jewish concern quite well represented in the Midrash to preserve the status of Abraham in the face of criticism for seemingly abandoning his own family in the desert.

Because of Ishmael's biblical as well as rabbinic association with Arabs, the context for the narrative extension naturally incorporated such motifs associated with Bedouin life as date agriculture and camel herding. It thus serves as a Jewish story of intersection with classic Arab life by acknowledging the proximity between the Genesis Abraham character and classical Bedouin life depicted by Ishmael. Such proximity was not lost on the Jews living throughout the Fertile Crescent, since migrations and raids of camel-herding nomads from ancient antiquity into the period of the seventh century Arab conquests regularly brought Arabs into the settled agricultural areas that surrounded the Arabian Peninsula.

Given the continual interaction between Jews and Arabs from biblical days to the present, it is not surprising that Arabic versions of this foundation story follow the basic Jewish narrative quite closely. Before examining them, however, it should be noted here that no pre-Islamic Arabian literature has been preserved in its pristine form. No manuscripts, for example, exist from pre-Islamic Arabia such as we have for ancient Judaism and Christianity with the Dead Sea Scrolls and early Christian papyri. One can only extrapolate, therefore, through our knowledge of literary history and methods to arrive at a theoretical pre-Islamic literary form for early Arabic material that we suspect may derive from pre-Islamic times. Everything we do have describing or reflecting pre-Islamic Arabia, from ancient legends to poetry and genealogies, can be found only in the form that was recorded by later Muslims, and these texts therefore strongly reflect the influence of Islam. The Arabic renderings of Abraham's visits to Ishmael are no exception. They epitomize the continued fusion of cultures.

In the Arabic versions found in many Islamic sources,[13] Abraham feels the need to visit his son, Ishmael and promises Sarah that he will not dismount from his riding animal. When he first arrives at Ishmael's home, he meets the inhospitable wife and delivers through her the coded message to change the threshold of his house. Ishmael understands, divorces his first wife, and then marries another woman who hospitably offers Abraham a feast on his subsequent visit. Aspects of the Arabic story, however, point also to local qualities that are particular to an Arabian environment. The names and genealogy of Ishmael's wives derive from local tribal traditions, for example, and they are not the names of Muhammad's wife or daughter. When the good wife feeds Abraham, the food is the diet of the Bedouin, which Abraham blesses. This, it explains, is why agriculture is impossible in the desolate mountainous settlement of Mecca, because Abraham specifically blessed the food of pastoral nomads and not oasis dwellers. It is assumed in the Arabic tellings that Ishmael is living in Mecca, and medieval Arab geographers record the tradition that the Arabic equivalent to the Hebrew *paran* mentioned as Ishmael's new abode in Genesis 21:21, is none other than *faran*, a reference to the mountains of Mecca.[14]

Ishmael's association with Mecca leads us to the Arabic extension of the story, not found in any Jewish sources, which brings Abraham on a third and final visit to his beloved son in what would become the sacred city of Mecca. The following translation is from Muhammad b. Isma`il al-Bukhārī (d.869), *al-Ṣaḥīḥ*.[15]

> [Abraham] stayed away from them for a while, but then came while Ishmael was sharpening some arrows he had under a tree near the Zam-zam well.[16] When [Ishmael] saw him [approach],

[13] For a synopsis of seventeen versions of this story in Arab sources, see Firestone, *Journeys in Holy Lands*, pp. 76-82. See also Aviva Schussman, "Abraham's Visits to Ishmael -- The Jewish Origin and Orientation" [Hebrew] in *Tarbiz* 49 (1980), 325-345.

[14] Yaqūt b. `Abdallah al-Rūmī (d.1229), *Mu`jam al-buldān* ("The Dictionary of Places"), 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-`Ilmiyya, 1990), 4:255.

[15] *Al-Anbiyā'*, #583. This work is one of the two most highly revered Islamic religious books after the Qur'ān, so such a narrative remains of great importance also in contemporary Islam.

[16] The Zam-zam well is the sacred well in Mecca, only a few steps away from the Ka`ba, from which Muslim pilgrims still drink.

> he arose and they greeted each other as a father would his son and as a son would his father. [Abraham] said: "O Ishmael, God has given me a command." [Ishmael] replied: "Then do as your Lord has commanded you." [Abraham] asked: "Will you help me?" He answered: "I will help you." So he said: "God has commanded me to build a house (*bayt*) here," and he pointed to a small hill raised up above what was around it. And with that, they raised the foundations of the Ka`ba (*al-Bayt*). Ishmael would bring the stones and Abraham would build it. When the building was raised up high [so that Abraham had difficulty reaching up to place the stones, Ishmael] brought a certain stone and set it down for him. [Abraham] stood upon it and built as Ishmael would hand him the stones, both of them saying [Q.2:127]: **O Lord, accept this from us, for You are the All-hearing, the All-knowing.**

The journey of this story of Abraham is striking. A biblically centered Jewish story evolves into an Arabian story as it journeys through the medium of oral tellings into an Arabian *milieu.* It may continue to be considered a "Jewish" legend as its narrators begin to incorporate local motifs into its repeated oral tellings, but it will eventually move across the boundary of Jewish particularity into generic Arabian culture. It becomes a legend which, for Arabian Jews, Christians and pagans, provides meaning to local traditions.

Abraham is known in the Bible as a wanderer and founder of sacred places. From Ur of the Chaldees he moves to Haran in northern Mesopotamia, and from Haran to the Land of Canaan. He sojourns in Egypt, and returns to Canaan to build an altar at Beth El and another at the Terebinths of Mamre in Hebron. He plants a sacred tree in Beersheba, and offers sacrifices in other unnamed sacred places where God speaks with him directly. Such an important traveling founder of sacred places as Abraham among Jews and Christians would easily be associated with local Arabian sacred sites as well. Why should he not have made his way into Arabia to found the sacred Ka`ba in Mecca, an ancient religious shrine and place of sacrifice? Even before Islam, Abraham was known to pagan Arabs. Ancient traditions recall that pictures of Abraham, Ishmael and Mary the mother of Jesus were kept among the figurines and effigies of the pre-Islamic Ka`ba.[17]

Abraham, then, had become a generic Arabian hero known to all the various inhabitants of the peninsula in pre-Islamic times. His was a shared name and image, but his essence was not identical to all pre-Islamic inhabitants of Arabia. To Arabian Jewry, he was the originator of God's covenant with the Jewish people, to Arabian Christians he was the first to acknowledge the truth of faith and spirit over the law,[18] and to Arabian pagans he was the founder of their sacred shrines and cult places in Mecca. Eventually, however, as Islam dominated the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, the Ka`ba and the sacred shrines in and around Mecca were "islamized" -- shed of their idols and incorporated into Islamic tradition. The Islamizing of Arabia included an increasing association with the ancient and original monotheist, Abraham, who naturally provided the proof of monotheistic authenticity as the *original* intent of the sacred sites. The Islamic Abraham cycle thus depicts the patriarch, along with his son Ishmael, establishing Mecca as a purely monotheistic site. Only generations later did Ishmael's descendants gradually abandon the strict monotheism of their ancestors and degenerate into the state of religious anarchy known as pre-Islamic polytheism. The purpose of Muhammad's prophethood was to correct for this error and reestablish the pristine Abrahamic monotheism with Islam. As the Abraham narrative journeyed through its Arabian environment from the pre-Islamic period into that of Islam, therefore, the *generic* or multiple Arabian associations with Abraham coalesced into an Islamic particularity. Abraham himself became islamized.

The Qur'ān, the very divine revelation of Islam, would claim Abraham as its own: [Q. 2:125-128]: **And when We made the House[19] a refuge and safe for humankind [We said]: Take as your place of worship the Place of Abraham (*maqām ibrāhīm*). We made a covenant with**

[17] Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, anbiyā'* 9:23, 24, etc.

[18] See Romans 4:9-25; Galatians 4:21-31, etc.

[19] The qur'ānic term for the Ka`ba in Mecca. In qur'ānic discourse, capitalized "We" refers to God, who is the divine narrator of the Qur'ān.

Abraham and Ishmael [saying]: Purify My house for those who circumambulate, are engaged [with it], and bow and prostrate themselves. So Abraham prayed: Lord, Make this area safe, and bestow its people with fruits -- those among them who believe in God and the Last Day. [God] answered: As for the unbeliever, I will grant him a little happiness. Then I will force him to the punishment of the Fire and a horrible end. And when Abraham and Ishmael were raising up the foundations of the House [they prayed]: Our Lord, Accept [this] from us, for You are the Hearer, the Knower. Our Lord, Make us submitters (*muslimayn*) to You and our progeny a submissive people to You (*umma muslima laka*). Show us the ritual places and turn toward us, for You are the One who causes to turn in repentance, the Merciful.

Ironically, rather than serving as a unifying motif to bring the "Abrahamic religions" together in dialogue as is attempted in our day, the person of Abraham served at times as the center of polemic between them in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. The Qur`ān itself bears witness to the controversy over Abraham in 3:65-7: **O People of Scripture! Why do you argue about Abraham, when the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed until after him? Have you no sense? Do you not argue about things of which you have knowledge? Why, then, argue about things of which you have no knowledge! God knows, but you know not! Abraham was not a Jew nor a Christian, but was an early monotheist (*ḥanīf*), a muslim [**i.e. one who submits to God's will**], not an idolater.**

Our story of Abraham's visits to Ishmael thus turns full circle. A Jewish midrashic tradition became part of the pre-Islamic Arabian "public domain" as it was woven into the very fabric of generic Arabian culture. As Islam then absorbed relevant Arabian lore into its emerging ethos, the story became part of the legacy that would be Islam. What began, then, as a narrative interpretation of a biblical passage among Jews, ended as a narrative interpretation of a qur'ānic passage among Muslims.

Is this Islamic "borrowing" from Judaism? Did Judaism provide the source for the qur'ānic verses and the Islamic concepts? This is a classic question that has influenced the nature of research on Islam and its relationship with Judaism and Christianity. Classic Orientalist studies of Islam tended to assume *a priori* that Islam "borrowed" its ideas from the "original" (meaning correct) ideas or beliefs of "Judeo-Christianity." They then set out to trace that history through textual analysis. As we have seen above, it is true that parallels may be found between Islamic and Jewish or biblical ideas and texts, and the parallels are many. But no religion is created *ex nihilo*. On the contrary, all scriptures and all religions combine *inspiration* (pure creativity), with *influence* (absorbing outside ideas). This includes the Bible. The many striking parallels between biblical *realia* and those of Canaanite culture and literatures demonstrate the heavy influence of Canaanite civilization. But because no human creation is absolutely without precedent, must every creation be assumed to be, at core, unoriginal and merely a result of borrowing? The answer is, of course, no, for the essence of creativity is inspiration within a context composed of preexisting realia -- that is, influence. The question of borrowing, therefore, becomes an issue that is actually beside the point, for no creation can consist only of inspiration without influence. Jews and Judaism indeed had a profound impact on emerging Islam, as did Christians and Christianity, pagan Arabs and pre-Islamic Arabian culture, and Persians and Zoroastrian traditions as well as those of Abyssinia, Greece, and so forth. But so too, would Islam strongly affect those very evolving traditions that influenced it in its formative stages. Such fluidity might be considered "reciprocal influence," for the commerce of cultures naturally assures that cultures impact, absorb, exude and recombine as they contact one another through the ever-permeable boundaries of inter-ethnic human contact and communication.

What kind of Arabian Judaism?

A second classic question affecting Western students of Islam is why Islamic expressions of some themes finding parallels in Judaism and Christianity seem at times to be so contrary to Jewish or Christian expressions. Some Islamic parallels and references to Jewish tradition seem

so odd that they are generally assumed by Westerners to have been misunderstandings or outright errors. The Qur'ān, for example, claims in 9:30: **The Jews say: Ezra (*`uzayr*) is the son of God, and the Christians say: The messiah is the son of God. This is what they say from their [own] mouths, resembling the speech of unbelievers of old. God fight them, for they lie!** In another passage, the Qur'ān asserts [5:64]: **The Jews say: the hand of God is fettered. [But] their hands are fettered! And they are cursed for what they say!**

From the perspective of Judaism in all of its extant forms, these verses seem to exhibit an extraordinary misunderstanding of Jewish belief. It is also possible that these qur`ānic verses are polemical statements meant to discredit Judaism, for it is quite clear that the Qur'ān, like other scriptures, is in part a polemical text. Rather than taking either of these approaches, we shall undertake to examine such Islamic records of Arabian Judaism from the hypothesis that they might in fact be accurate representations of Jewish ideas or practice.

The Qur'ān represents itself as the word of God spoken through the prophet Muhammad to the people of seventh century Arabia. However, because the Qur'ān appears as if it was revealed in serial form during the twenty-two years of Muhammad's prohetic mission, it seems on many occasions to describe or respond to actual historical phenomena or situations that Muhammad encountered. Muslim Qur'ān scholars have attempted to reconstruct the occasions of revelation based on their impression of Muhammad's biography, but little consensus has been reached among them. This, in part, has led some Western scholars to suggest that the Qur'ān represents the thinking or history of an entirely different period and geography ranging from pre-Islamic Arabian tradition to heterodox Babylonian Jewish traditions of the eighth or ninth centuries. These views are interesting but not compelling, and they have not garnered enough support to merit abandoning the traditional chronographic and geographic setting for the contents of the Qur'ān. The verses cited above therefore seem to reflect an observation of seventh century Medinan Jewish belief.

It is clear that sixth and seventh century Judaisms were still in a state of flux as Rabbinic Judaism was establishing itself as the dominant and soon to be virtual monopolistic expression of the religion of Israel. It would be a grave error to assume, *a priori*, that the kind (or kinds) of Judaism believed and practiced by seventh century Arabian Jews was the same as that of Maimonides in twelfth century Egypt. Despite its relative proximity to the Land of Israel, Babylon and Egypt, the largely desolate Arabian Peninsula was not a regular stop for travelers and peoples moving within the "Fertile Crescent" and cannot be assumed to have fallen under the influence of distant schools. In fact, the isolation of the peninsular served regularly as a refuge for people seeking freedom from outside influence. We know, for example, that early Christian communities found asylum from Roman persecution in various Arabian desert regions, and later groups escaped the theological compulsion of the orthodox Byzantine Empire in the safety of the Arabian Peninsula. These were non-orthodox Christians who sought out sanctuary in Arabia in order to practice their heterodox beliefs without interference. It is quite likely, although we have less documentation for Jews of this period than for Christians, that some non-Rabbinic or marginal Rabbinic Jewish groups did the same when Rabbinic missionizing to them became more forceful.

Although perhaps surprising, some of the ideas attributed to the Jews by the qur'ānic passages cited above are very much within the parameters of Jewish thinking in late antiquity, although they may not necessarily reflect what we would today call Rabbinic Judaism. In relation to the first qur'ānic passage suggesting that the Jews deify Ezra, for example, the originally Jewish books known as 4 Ezra (14:9, 50[20] also known as 2 Esdras) and 2 Enoch (22:11) associate a near-divine or angelic status to the biblical personages of Ezra and Enoch that could have been construed by early Muslims as compromising an austere and absolute conception of monotheism. The second qur'ānic citation may in fact reflect a Jewish interpretive midrash on Lamentations 2:3: **He has withdrawn his right hand in the presence of the foe...**.[21] 3 Enoch 48a actually

[20] This verse is found only in the Oriental (Syriac, Etheiopic, Armenian and Arabic) recensions, not in the Latin.

[21] Lamentations Rabbah 2:6, as suggested by David Halperin and cited indirectly by Newby, *History* 59.

reads, "R. Ishmael said to me: Come and I will show you the right hand of the Omnipresent One, which has been banished behind him because of the destruction of the Temple."[22]

If some Jews of the seventh century Hijaz were familiar with these non-canonical Jewish compositions, it is likely that they were not all Rabbinic Jews. The Qur'ān itself seems to refer to different categories among those who accept the Torah as Scripture [Q.5:44]: **We have sent down the Torah (*al-tawrāt*) containing guidance and light, by which the prophets who surrendered [to God] judged the Jews (*alladhīna hādū*), the *rabbāniyūn*, and the *aḥbār*.** The latter two terms are generally identified in traditional Islamic scholarship as "rabbis" and "scholars," and there is indeed support for the singular form, *rabbānī*, deriving from the Hebrew *rav*, *rabbi*, or *rabbān*, and for the Arabic *ḥabr* or *ḥibr* deriving from the Rabbinic title, *ḥaver*. On the other hand, this qur'ānic verse seems to differentiate between the three as if three related but different groups were judged by God through the Torah and the prophets. Another translation might read: **We have sent down the Torah containing guidance and light, by which the prophets who surrendered [to God] judged the Jews, the Rabbanites and those of the ḥavurot.**[23]

In another qur'ānic passage, the same *rabbāniyūn* are described specifically as being very closely engaged in the study and teaching of Scripture [3:79]: **Be *rabbāniyīn* by virtue of your teaching/knowing the Book, and in virtue of your studying it.** Might this be a reference to a distinctively Rabbinic, text-centered Judaism, as opposed to other Judaisms -- perhaps even a form of Judaism that may have survived from the period before the destruction of the Temple? It is still impossible to arrive at any firm conclusions, but the evidence suggests that the Jews of Arabia at the birth of Islam were not all Rabbinic, and that a range of Jewish expression existed.

There is certainly evidence that at least some seventh century Jews of the Hijaz went into trances and engaged in other mantic activities, perhaps even engaging in mystic journeys, that parallel those of the *merkavah* mystics of the Land of Israel. In one case, which appears to reflect at least an element of historical reality, Muhammad himself attempted to observe a Jewish practitioner engaged in mantic activity in Medina.[24] Muhammad, in fact, had a great deal of contact with a large and diverse Jewish community in Medina, and the relationship that ensued between Muhammad and the Medinan Jews would have a tremendous impact on the future of world Jewry. But in order to make sense of this important period, we must first backtrack to the origins of Islam as understood by Islam itself.

Early Islam confronts Medinan Judaism

The prophet, Muhammad, received his first divine revelation in about 610 C.E., while meditating in a cave on the outskirts of his native town, Mecca. He shared his experience with his wife, Khadīja, and with his family and close friends, but according to the collective memory of Islam he refrained from preaching publicly until about three years later.

Islamic tradition describes Muhammad's prophetic mission in great detail, from the first words of revelation he received at that terrifying moment in the cave at Mt. Hira, to the last words he would utter at the moment of his death. The general chronicle of Muhammad's mission unfolds as a single narrative in the great biography of the Prophet known as the *Sīra*, but that composition is a result of collecting and editing thousands of brief and independent oral tellings, called *ḥadīth*s, depicting discrete parts of his life. These *ḥadīth*s are literary building blocks found in the form of short eye-witness reports describing various aspects of Muhammad's life, his habits, and his utterances. They existed in oral form for generations before being systematically collected and reduced to writing, and only after their collection into large compendia organized

[22] Cited by Newby, *History* 59. See also David Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot* (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1988), 467-68.

[23] Or, "those of the *ḥaverīm*." See, however, Q. 5:63.

[24] David J. Halperin, "The Ibn Sayyad Traditions and the Legend of al-Dajjal," in *JOAS* 96 (1976), 213-225.

first by the names of those who told them and then by topics, were they rearranged into the linear narrative of the *Sīra*. Often consisting of only a dozen or more words, each *hadīth* focuses on one small item, ranging from how Muhammad cleaned his teeth to his very words describing his experience of God. As might be expected of such data, the basic *hadīth* building blocks making up the prophetic narrative often contradict one another. The ancient collectors of these traditions therefore faced the daunting task of evaluating and organizing the material into forms that would lend insight and provide spiritual and intellectual guidance to the community of Muslim believers.

The *Sīra* composed by Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq in the mid-eighth century is the earliest and best-respected biography of Muhammad. Ibn Isḥāq's *Sira*, however, does not always agree with the parallel material found in such early historical works as Al-Wāqidī's *al-Maghāzī*, Ibn Sa`d's *al-Ṭabaqāt* or the other early collections of Prophetic Tradition, and no corroborative record of early Islamic history may be found outside the religious literature of Islam. The available narrative of Muhammad's prophetic career therefore represents the collective memory of Islam, and this memory includes a great amount of information about Jewish communities and individuals among whom Muhammad lived and interacted. In fact, the *Sīra*, the Qur'ān, and other early sources all openly acknowledge the major impact of Jews and Judaism on early Islamic history. Muhammad lived among Jews, recited the divine revelations to them, and expected them to join his religious fellowship. He spoke, argued, and fought with Jews, and warmly accepted Jewish converts to Islam. But this period of intense interaction with Jews in the life of the Prophet would occur only after his having left his native Mecca.

After receiving the divine call, Muhammad preached openly in his native town and gained followers, but he also created enemies when he disparaged the gods of old Arabian idolatry. Mecca had been a cultic center of indigenous Arabian religions for generations before the birth of Muhammad, and it served as a major place of pilgrimage for Arabs from throughout the region. Perhaps because of this idolatrous quality of Meccan life, there is no record of Jewish or Christian communities in the town, though biblical ideas were known in Arabia by the early seventh century. Biblical motifs had penetrated even into the cultic practices of indigenous Arabian religion, to such an extent that, as noted previously, representations of Abraham, Jesus and Mary were said to have been placed among the images worshipped at the pre-Islamic Ka`ba. While still in Mecca, according to Islamic tradition and accepted by most Western scholars as well, Muhammad recited revelations containing reference to personages, occasions and concepts found also in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. Noah, the Flood, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, a day of judgment, concepts of heaven and hell, etc. may all be found in what are generally considered the "Meccan" verses, those revealed to Muhammad during his early prophetic career while living in the town of his birth.

As the Islamic sources tell it, powerful Meccans had much at stake in a religious tourism industry that had grown up around the important pilgrimage customs associated with the holy places in Mecca. Pilgrims needed food, lodging, and guides to take them to the various shrines and direct them as to the most efficacious activities and offerings required at each sacred site, and these services were provided by powerful families and coalitions in the town. When Muhammad defamed the idolatry that was at the base of this economy, he gained powerful enemies. He was protected by powerful members of his extended family for a time, but his two most stalwart protectors died in the same year, leaving him in a position of great weakness. It was shortly thereafter that he received an invitation to move to Medina in order to arbitrate an intractable feud that had developed between the major tribal clans of the settlement. Muhammad made his *hijra* or "emigration" with his followers to Medina in 622, which marks the year zero of the Islamic or *hijri* calendar. It was in Medina that Muhammad would come into regular and ongoing contact with a substantial Jewish community.

Muhammad knew that he was a prophet of God sent to the Arab people. The Qur'ān itself, narrated in God's words, proclaims that the divine revelations he received were sent to enlighten the Arabs [43:2-5]: **By the Book that makes clear, We have made it an Arabic Qur'ān, so**

perhaps you will all understand. It is [from] the Mother of Books,[25] in Our presence, exalted, wise. Shall We deny you the Word because you are a people of excess?

Muhammad had been opposed by most of the Arabs in his home town, but in Medina there lived a large Jewish Arab community with a long history of prophets and Scripture. He logically surmised that they would naturally flock to his divine revelations and prophecies. We have already learned the story of Abdullah ibn Salām, but he was not the only Jew to have awaited a messianic figure. Others seem to have expected a redeemer to arise from the south, which, from the perspective of Medina was the direction of Mecca. The *Sira* records the statement of a Salama b. Salāma b. Waqsh:

> We had a Jewish neighbor among the [clan of the] Banu `Abd al-Ashhal who came out to us one day from his home....He spoke of the resurrection, the [divine] reckoning, the [heavenly] scales, the Garden and the Fire...[They asked] "What would be a sign of this?" He said, pointing with his hand to Mecca and the Yemen [i.e., southward]: "A prophet will be sent from the direction of this land." They asked: "When will he appear?" He looked at me, the youngest person, and said: "This boy, if he lives his natural term, will see him." And by God, a night and a day did not pass before God sent Muhammad, His messenger, and he was living among us. We believed in him, but [the Jewish neighbor] denied him....When we asked him, "Aren't you the man who said these things? He said, "Certainly, but this is not the man."[26]

The expectation of a messiah arising from Arabia was widespread enough to have attracted some Jews to the area from the Land of Israel and its environs. The following statement is cited on the authority of a leader (*shaykh*) of the Jewish tribe in Medina known as the Banu Qurayẓa: "A Syrian Jew[27] named Ibn al-Hayyabān came to us a few years before Islam and lived with us....When he was about to die, he said: 'O Jews, what do you think made me leave a land of bread and wine to come to a land of hardship and hunger?' We answered: 'You know best.' He said: 'I came to this town to see the emergence of a prophet whose time had come. This is the town to which he will migrate.... '"[28]

Such traditions are clearly made to prove, from the Islamic perspective, the authenticity of Muhammad's prophethood, but they correspond with Jewish ideas and are found so frequently that they seem to reflect a genuine expectation among at least some Jews. The irony of such messianic expectations is clear from another tradition found later in the *Sīra*:

> `Āṣim b. `Umar b. Qatāda said on the authority of some elders of his tribe, who said: When the Messenger of God met them he said: "Who are you?" They answered: "From the Khazraj [tribe of Medina]." "Are you allies of the Jews?" "Yes," they answered. So he said: "Will you not sit with me so I can talk with you?" "Of course," they replied. So they sat with him, and he called them to God, expounded to them Islam, and recited for them the Qur'ān. Now God had prepared them for Islam in that the Jews, who were people of the Book and knowledge while they themselves were polytheists and idolaters, lived with them in their towns. They used to raid [the Jews] in their settlements, and when [bad feelings] arose between them the Jews would say: "A prophet is being sent soon. His time has come. We will follow him and kill you with his help [just as] `Ād and Iram were destroyed."[29] So when the Messenger of God spoke with this group and called them to God, some of them said to the others: "By God, this is the very prophet about which the Jews had threatened us. Do not let them get to him before us!" So they responded to his call, believed him, and accepted his teaching of Islam.[30]

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[25] This common idiom means, in essence, the "essential divine word" or divine source from which all revelation comes.

[26] *Al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (Beirut, n.d.) 1:212/Guillaume 93-4.

[27] The common designation for the Land of Israel in medieval Arabic texts is [greater] Syria (*al-shā'm*).

[28] *Sīra* 213-14/Guillaume 94.

[29] `Ād and Iram are names of ancient Arabian tribal groups that had long disappeared by the emergence of Islam but which still lived in the memories and oral traditions of the Arabs.

[30] *Sīra* 1:428-429/Guillaume 197-198.

Given the messianic expectations of at least some Jews in Medina, it may seem surprising that, with few exceptions, the Jews did not flock to Muhammad's teachings despite the general acceptance of his leadership among non-Jewish Medinans within a few years of his arrival. With the highly *arabized* nature of the Jewish community of Medina and at least a certain amount of common arabized biblical culture shared between Jews and pagans, one might expect a more equal response to the option of joining the Arabian monotheism being introduced by Muhammad. The Jews resisted, however, and evidence from the Qur'ān will be cited below which provides some clues as to why they did. Emerging Islam offered an indigenous Arabian monotheism that proved more attractive to Arabs than the Hebrew-Aramaic cultural foundation of Judaism. Muhammad seems not to have fit the specifically Jewish cultural paradigm of the expected one closely enough, and the revelations and prophecies he recited in the squares of Medina, while parallel to many in the Hebrew Bible, seem not to have satisfied Jewish expectations. The Jewish community chose not to follow him, and it eventually suffered exile, slavery and destruction as a result.

The Qur'ān innocently provides some specific information about the way Jews responded to Muhammad's teachings in Medina. It expresses bitterness and disappointment at the Jewish refusal to accept the new divine dispensation. At the same time, it notes with some consolation that this behavior was not new, for the Israelites were a stiff-necked people that did not fully follow Moses, nor were they true to their own covenant. **Remember: We made a covenant with you and raised up the mountain over you [saying]: "Take hold firmly of what We have given you and remember what is in it. Perhaps you will be pious." But you turned away after that. If it were not for God's grace and mercy toward you, you would have been among the losers** [2:63-64, directed as if to Jews]**.**[31] This recollection of God threatening the Israelites with death under a mountain if they would not accept the Torah finds a parallel in early midrashic tradition,[32] demonstrating the Qur'ān's intertextual relationship not only with biblical lore, but rabbinic tradition as well.

Most Medinan Jews did not accept Muhammad's Qur'ān recitation as accurate statements of Scripture. The Qur'ān observes that they would note the discrepancies between the qur'ānic renderings of biblical themes and those with which they were familiar from their own Scripture. It therefore accuses them of tampering and distorting their own scriptural record from the original revelation they received at Sinai. The pure and undistorted Sinaitic revelation would have been consistent with that of the new revelation given to Muhammad, and indeed, according to later Islamic tradition, it even included prophecies of the coming of the Arabian prophet. **There are some among [the People of the Book] who distort Scripture with their tongues so that you would think it is from Scripture, but it is not from Scripture. They say: "This is from God" though it is not from God. They knowingly speak falsehood about God** [3:78]. Because the Hebrew Bible, like the Christian, is considered to have been tampered with, neither are accepted by Islam as dependable sources of divine revelation. On the other hand, the Qur'ān also notes how some Jews did indeed believe in Muhammad's words of prophecy [3:199]: **There are some among the People of the Book who believe in God and in what He revealed to you and what has been revealed to them, humbling themselves to God...**.

Jews also challenged Muhammad to demonstrate his prophethood according to biblical precedents, such as that of Elijah, who in 1 Kings 18, demonstrated the truth of his prophethood by having his sacrifice consumed by a heavenly fire. **[There are] those [Jews] who say: "God has obligated us not to believe in a messenger until he offers a sacrifice that the fire will consume..."** [3:183].

The Qur'ān remained an unwritten oral text throughout Muhammad's lifetime and was only systematically recorded after his death. The oral nature of the early Qur'ān proved a difficulty for Muhammad, for he was challenged by the Jews to confirm his prophecy by showing them that

[31] The theme of the Israelites breaking their own covenant is repeated in the Qur'ān: 2:84, 93, 100; 3:187; 5:12-13.

[32] BT *Shabbat* 88a, *Tanḥuma*, *Bereshit* 58:3, etc. The motif is also repeated in the Qur'ān (2:93; 4:154).

he was in possession of a physical book of Scripture. **The People of the Book ask you to bring down to them a Book from heaven** [4:153]. It is quite clear that the Jewish rejection of Muhammad was not a polite refusal to accept his authority and program, but rather a serious and proactive resistance. **Many of the People of the Book want to make you unbelievers again after your having believed...** [2:109]. Why, we might ask, would the Jews take such an active stand against Muhammad and his community?

The answer to this question lies both in the distinct nature of the Jews' cultural identity and in their particular political and religious standing in Medina. The Jewish community of Medina had recently lost its absolute political dominance in the town but remained a powerful force, and the three major Jewish tribes were allied with the now dominant non-Jewish factions in a complex set of political and kinship relationships. That is, not only did Jewish tribes have alliances and pacts of non-aggression with non-Jewish tribes, there were Jewish clans or factions that were members of tribes not identified specifically as Jewish. It was therefore not uncommon for Jews and non-Jews to belong to identical kinship groups, suggesting that intermarriage within kinship groups probably also occurred.

Medina suffered from a great deal of tension and violence between competing tribes and kinship groups just prior to Muhammad's emigration there, and Muhammad was actually invited to Medina to arbitrate and resolve the rampant factionalism of the town. Muhammad's main strategy to this end was to create a trans-tribal religious organization of believers who's loyalty to God (and God's religious community) would transcend loyalty to tribe. The traditional tribal system of loyalties and relationships based on kinship and tribal alliances upon which the Jewish community of Medina depended was therefore beginning to give way to Muhammad's super-tribe of believers. Muhammad's successes in building this super-tribe threatened the Jews of Medina in three ways. First, the Jews' protective political/tribal alliances began to unravel and become meaningless as more and more Medinans joined the growing Muslim community. Second, by claiming to be God's prophet and spokesman for authentic monotheism, Muhammad threatened the important and prestigious Jewish standing as representatives of ancient monotheism in a region dominated by pagan idolaters. And third, as more and more Medinans were influenced by Muhammad and his message, the very essence of the Jews' distinct Jewish-Arab identity was threatened by the likelihood that there would be no role for them in a Muslim Medina. In their opposition to Muhammad, therefore, the Jews were guarding their political position, their religious tradition, and their distinct identity as Jewish Arabs within the larger fabric of Arabian culture, all of which were in danger of becoming weakened and perhaps lost altogether by the growth of Muhammad's movement.

The Jews of Medina therefore sought to prevent Muhammad's rise to dominance, and in doing so they engaged in tactics that fully reflect Arab cultural norms and expectations. The composition and public recitation of poetry, for example, was used to discredit or humiliate enemies as well as enhance the status and pride of one's own community in pre-Islamic Arabia, and poetic satire was used in Muhammad's day as well in order to demean or humiliate one's enemy. Medinan Jews such as Abu `Afak, Ka`b b. al-Ashraf and the woman, `Aṣmā' bt. Marwān, are cited in Islamic sources as having written poems criticizing Muhammad and his followers, and even inciting people against him. Women as well as men engaged in this activity on both sides. The Muslim poetess, Maymūna bt. `Abdallah, for example, is said to have answered Ka`b al-Ashraf's negative verse in kind. And the poetess, `Aṣmā' bt. Marwān who may have been a convert to Judaism, was considered such a threat that Muḥammad asked who might volunteer to silence her threatening words. `Aṣmā' belonged to a tribal grouping made up of both Jewish and non-Jewish Medinans who were opposed to the Prophet's leadership in Medina. Her poem discredits Muḥammad's leadership and calls on her fellow Medinans to attack him. She is countered by none other than the great Ḥassān b. Thābit, sometimes referred to as the "poet laureate" of the Prophet, who threatened her with death in his own poetic retort for her powerful words. Poetry, then, was an important and effective medium for polemic and political posturing, and both men and women engaged in the art. As the conflict between Muhammad and the Jews of Medina intensified, the stakes in the final outcome grew higher. Some of the incendiary poems and their

responses are reproduced in the *Sīra*, and all three Jewish poets mentioned here were eventually assassinated by Muhammad's followers.[33]

The Qur'ān and Sīra bear witness to this war of words and the impact it had on Medinan Arabs. One difficult and somewhat obscure qur'ānic verse, for example, seems to allude to an attempt by Jews to humiliate Muhammad while he was in the midst of preaching to the public in Medina. Q.4:46 reads, **There are some Jews who change the words from their places by saying: "we hear and disobey" (*sami`nā wa`aṣaynā*) and "listen, you who are not listened to", and "look at us", twisting their tongues and speaking evil of religion. If they had only said, "we hear and obey" (*sami`nā wa`aṭa`nā*)...it would be better for them and more upright. But God cursed them for their unbelief, and they do not believe, except for a few.** This verse cites three incendiary statements made by the Jews in relation to Islam and the Prophet, and then proceeds to correct them by stating what they *should* have said. It seems to be referring to public statements, and one can imagine the satirical power of such statements if one reconstructs the likely context of Muhammad's public preaching in Medina.

It is impossible to reconstruct the original context of any ancient text with confidence, and this certainly includes the Qur'ān. Nonetheless, we can sketch a plausible historical context for this particular passage given other information we have regarding the cultural history of seventh century Medina. The Qur'ān depicts Muhammad publicly reciting and interpreting the divine revelations to his followers and other interested onlookers. During the course of his recitation and preaching, one of a group of Jews in the crowd publicly calls out to Muhammad "*Sami`nā wa`ṣaynā, ya Muhammad! Sami`nā wa`aṣaynā*!" The phrase is immediately recognizable to a Jew familiar with biblical recitation in Hebrew, for although it is Arabic, it *sounds* virtually like a quote of Deuteronomy 5:24: ***Shamā`nū ve`asīnū***, meaning **We hear and we obey**. In the Arabic, however, it means the opposite: "We hear and disobey." To the Jewish bystander, the phrase would be understood according to its bilingual meaning with the full force of the *double entendre*: "We hear and obey *our* religious tradition, O Muhammad [Hebrew meaning] but we hear and publicly acclaim our *disobedience* to *your* religious preaching [Arabic meaning]!" This clever taunt would undoubtedly elicit a laugh among Jewish bystanders, while Muslims and other non-Jewish Medinans unfamiliar with the biblical phrase in Hebrew would simply not understand the humor. The result would be confusion on the part of Muhammad and his followers amidst the laughter of the Jewish onlookers. Public embarrassment and humiliation would result from their confusion and the mockery from their opponents who understood the pun -- a goal of effective public satire in humiliating one's adversary.

This passage portrays the Jews of Medina as deeply acculturated to Arabian linguistic, literary and cultural norms, yet remaining loyal to their particular identity as Jews. Medina had its famous and powerful Jewish tribes or clans such as the famous Banū Qaynuqā`, the Banū Naḍīr and the Banū Qurayẓa, and individual Jews or groups of Jews belonged to tribes and clans not known specifically as being Jewish. Despite their deep and successful integration into Arabian culture, their Jewishness seems not to have been determined only by religious beliefs. The Jews of Medina are sometimes described in the sources as a *jummā`*, meaning "aggregate" or "collective." This could be a reference to a certain range of religious expressions within a collective identity of Jewishness, or it could refer to a trans-tribal "ethnic" Jewish sub-culture, not based on a genetic or biological distinction but rather on a transcendent sense of peoplehood that could include a variety of subsumed expressions of practice or beliefs within it. Either of these possibilities might seem to contradict the earlier observation that Medinan Jews were not above the tribal factionalism that plagued early seventh century Medina. In fact, however, the two trajectories of identity may have lived quite intimately together. Highly integrated into the tribal social system of Arabian society, Jews naturally identified closely with their kinship groups while still retaining a super-tribal sense of Jewish identity, even if they did not always share every

[33] *Sīra* 2:51-58, 635-38/Guillaume 364-69, 675-76; Jan Wensinck, *Muhammad and the Jews of Medina* (Berlin: Adiyok, 1982), 110-12; Michael Lecker, *Muslims, Jews and Pagans*, 38-48; Watt, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford: Clarenden, 1956), 15, 18, 178-79, 210.

detail of religious belief. The Islamic sources are certainly not consistent in their descriptions of Medinan Jews, suggesting that the community was layered -- that it was not monolithic politically, economically, socially or religiously. At the same time that Medinan Jews are identified as a "collective," they are described as speaking, looking, dressing and acting like other Arabs. Sometimes they are portrayed as identifying themselves as Jews and as being identified by others as such as well. In others, they are portrayed acting exactly like any other Medinan Arab and without any hint of their Jewish identity.

The Medinan Jews failed to prevent Muhammad's rise in influence and power. They were, rather, successfully divided and conquered by Muhammad and his followers. Two of the three powerful Medinan Jewish tribes were exiled while of the third, the women and children were taken as booty and the adult males killed. This important episode of Jewish and early Muslim history has been of some interest to Western scholars, which has in turn stimulated a reexamination by Muslims, and the entire issue has become controversial.[34] Western scholars have tended to condemn the treatment of the Jewish tribes by their Muslim opponents, and particularly that of the Banū Qurayẓa whose adult men were executed, as being cruel, unnecessary and unethical. Muslims have tended to condemn the behavior of the Jews in relation to Muhammad as treacherous in aiding his enemies, conniving against him, and murderous, thereby deserving of such draconian measures. What both viewpoints leave out of the discussion is the observation that both Muhammad and the Jews were acting according to the cultural expectations of seventh century Arabia. It should only be expected that the nature of politics is informed by culture. The two sides were both working under the same basic "rules of engagement" through which factions at the time jockeyed for dominance when the stakes were high. As it was, the competition between Muhammad and the Medinan Jews during the first two years of Muhammad's coming to town was a "zero sum game" in which there could be only one winner -- and both sides seemed to have known that.

By the time of Muhammad's death in 632, there were only a few Jews still living in Medina, what had then become known as *Madīnat al-Nabī*, the "City of the Prophet." As is evident from some of the qur'ānic verses examined above, the conflict between Muhammad and the Jewish community of Medina became immortalized in the Qur'ān as well as the Hadith, and anti-Jewish sentiment based on this conflict has become canonized as Scripture. On the other hand, some, although far fewer, qur'ānic passages demonstrate a sense of openness and toleration of Jews and other peoples of the Book. **Those who believe [in Islam], the Jews, Christians, and Sabians -- whoever believes in God and the Last Day, and has acted uprightly, have their reward with their Lord. They shall not fear nor grieve** [2:62].

In the aftermath of the great Arab Conquest, the many Jewish communities that suddenly came under the hegemony of Islam did not fare any worse under their Muslim rulers than they did under their prior Christian and Zoroastrian rulers, and in most cases it appears that they fared significantly better. It should be remembered that during the first century or more of Islamic rule, Islam was continuing to define itself, so Islamic influence and pressure was negligent in the immediate wake of the conquests, and then only increased over the years. It must also be remembered that the official Muslim policy toward "peoples of the Book," that is, Jews, Christians and other religious groups that could claim a divine Scripture, was quite different than it was toward polytheists. The policy toward the latter came to be based on Qur'ān 9:5: **...then kill the polytheists wherever you find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them everywhere; but if they repent, and establish prayers and pay *zakāt* [**a required tax distributed to the needy]**, then open the way for them: for God is forgiving, compassionate.** This verse became the authoritative source for the policy absolutely outlawing idolatry within the Islamic world. Polytheists were to be given the choice of conversion to Islam or death.

[34] See, for example, Wensinck and Watt, listed above, and W. F. Arafat, "New Light on the Story of Banu Qurayza and the Jews of Medina," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1976), 100-107; Barakat Ahmad, *Muhammad and the Jews: A Re-examination* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1979). M. J. Kister summarizes the various views in his "The Massacre of the Banu Qurayza: A re-examination of a tradition," in *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 8 (1986), 61-96.

The policy toward Jews and other Scriptuaries (peoples of Scripture) such as Christians and Zoroastrians came to be based on Qur'ān 9:29: **Fight against those who do not believe in God or in the Last Day, and do not forbid what God and His messenger have forbidden, and do not practice the religion of truth among those who have been given the Book, until they pay the *jizya*, off hand, humbled.** Such Scriptuaries, which category was extended to include other religions as well, were to be fought until they accepted the hegemony of Islam, but were then free to practice their religions without interference on the condition that they pay a special tax (*jizya*) and submit to a secondary societal status.

Eventually, most Jews living in the Islamic world did become Muslim, while even a higher percentage of Christians converted to Islam.[35] The debate over the reason for this fact has also raised controversy, with one view claiming that Muslims forced conversion either outright or through "cultural imperialism," while the other suggests that such conversion is a natural voluntary response of subdominant groups to the attraction of a dominant host culture allowing for relatively porous boundaries between the cultures of the rulers and the ruled.

In any event, it would take at least three centuries for the majority population of the Islamic Middle East to become Muslim. Certainly in the earliest period of emergent Islam, most Jews seem to have remained faithful to their ancestral traditions. A few key Jewish converts, however, had a profound effect on emerging Islam. The first, as noted above, was Abdullah ibn Salām, who became an exemplar in Islamic tradition of the few Jewish scholars who would admit that Muhammad was indeed referred to in the Torah as the final prophet of God. Another early Jewish convert, and one who was extremely influential in the developing methodologies and contents of early Islamic exegesis and tradition, was a Yemenite Jew named Abū Isḥāq Ka`b b. Matī`, but known more commonly as Ka`b al-Aḥbār, meaning roughly, "Ka`b, the religious scholar."[36]

Ka`b al-Aḥbār: from fame to notoriety

Ka`b and the tale of his conversion and subsequent impact on the early caliphs and other Muslim leaders are enveloped in legend. Nevertheless, we shall observe how his story, even with its marbled layers of fact and fiction, sheds important light on aspects of the complex relationship between Jews and early Muslims and between early Medieval Judaism and the emergence of Islam.

Ka`b was from southern Arabia, which, in the sixth and seventh centuries, had a large Jewish and Christian population. Very little is known of his life before he converted to Islam, but the sources suggest that he derived from a well-known Yemenite Arab tribe, and perhaps even from the great tribe of Ḥimyar, which produced kings that ruled much of southern Arabia for centuries and may have converted as a collective to Judaism already in the early fifth century. Ka`b was greatly revered by his Muslim contemporaries for his wisdom and scholarship. He counted among his students two of the most important early Muslim scholars and traditionists, Abdullah ibn `Abbās who is known as the originator of Islamic exegesis, and Abdullah Abu Hurayra, one of the most prolific sources of *ḥadīth*s on the behavior and sayings of Muhammad.

Like other Yemenite Jews, Ka`b did not join most of his non-Jewish neighbors in becoming Muslim during Muhammad's lifetime or even during the reign of the first caliph, Abu Bakr. He was born before Muhammad, and it is curious that he seems to have changed his mind about Islam only when he had become a mature man in his seventies or perhaps older. What exactly inspired him to convert is unknown, but he made his way as a Jew to Medina, the City of the Prophet, during the reign of the second caliph, Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. When he arrived in Medina

[35] Richard Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

[36] Literally "Ka`b of the *haverim*." *Al-aḥbār* is a plural form of *ḥibr*, the Arabic equivalent to the Talmudic title, *ḥaver*. Although in early Islam, the term is usually applied to a few pious and learned Jewish converts, it was sometimes associated also with exceptional Muslims lacking any known Jewish lineage.

in 636, he found few Jews remaining in the town who had not been exiled or converted to Islam. Ka`b became close to the caliph and attracted pious Muslims to him because of his knowledge of the Bible and its midrashic interpretation. This period in Medina is quite interesting because, according to the histories, Ka`b lived there as a Jew for some two years before becoming a Muslim.

Ka`b is depicted as teaching from a Torah scroll in the mosque, according to the Muslim traditionist Ḥusayn b. Abil-Ḥurr al-Anbārī, and famous scholars are depicted as asking him to interpret difficult verses from the Qur'ān, which, typically, he would interpret from the context of biblical stories. In a tradition found in the famous Hadith collection of Mālik b. Anās, Ka`b is said to have observed a man who took off his shoes in a mosque. Ka`b turned to the man and said: "Why did you remove your shoes? Was it because you were interpreting the [Qur'ān] verse (Q.20:12): **Take off your shoes, for you are in the holy valley, Tuwa**?"[37]

This scriptural verse is part of a qur'ānic narrative parallel to Exodus 3 in which Moses sees a burning fire out of the midst of which his name is called. Ka`b then asks the man who had removed his shoes: "And do you know of what Moses' shoes were made? They were made from the leather of a dead donkey." It is clear from both Exodus 3:5 and Qur'ān 20:12 that God demanded of Moses that he remove his shoes. Both scriptural texts associate the removing of shoes with Moses being in a sacred place, but neither explains exactly what the reason was for removing shoes in such circumstances. Ka`b fills in the gap with the explanation that Moses' shoes were made from the skin of a dead donkey (*jild ḥimār mayyit*). Exactly what the significance of this fact is has been lost to us, but was obvious enough in Ka`b's day that the listener did not need further explanation. Could the issue have been that shoes made of donkey leather were considered defiling and therefore had to be removed when in a place of divine sanctity?[38] Was his point that any clothing made of animal skin was forbidden in such a place, or was he simply suggesting a reason for an old local custom?

Because Ka`b's explanation is found in Islamic literature, he is portrayed as making his point about the *Islamic* custom of removing one's shoes when entering a place of prayer, and he does so by anchoring it to a scriptural text in typical exegetical fashion, Muslim or Jewish. In doing so, however, he refers to a reason that is no longer remembered, perhaps reflecting an old *Jewish* Arabian custom no longer practiced today in a Jewish context but now standard practice in Islam. Ka`b cites the Qur'ān, but he may well be citing it as a parallel to the Exodus text, subsequently applying a Jewish explanation to the qur'ānic verse in order to make his point. The comment that Moses' shoes were made of the skin of a donkey cannot be found in extant Jewish sources, but given Ka`b's acknowledged Jewish background, he may have been articulating an old Jewish interpretation that has since been lost from Jewish tradition.

Ka`b is typically portrayed in the sources as using biblical and midrashic literature as the basis for his views on Islamic doctrine and tradition. His Jewish knowledge seems to have served him well, and he was well-respected by his Muslim peers who often consulted him. One tradition, found also in Malik's collection,[39] has the famous Muslim scholar, Abu Hurayra, relate of when he went to meet Ka`b. "I sat with him. He told me about the Torah and I told him about the Apostle of God. One of the things I told him was that the Apostle of God said: 'The best of days upon which the sun ever arose is Friday. Adam was created on that day, was brought down from the Garden on that day, was pardoned on that day, and died on that day. The [final] Hour will occur on that day...and there is a time during that day when a Muslim does not pray [formally, but if] he asks something of God, he is granted it.' Ka`b said: 'This is [but] one day of the year.' I answered: 'No, every Friday.' So Ka`b consulted the Torah (*tawrāh*) and said: 'The Apostle of God is correct.'"

[37] *Al-Muwaṭṭa' K. al-libās* 16 (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-Maṣrī, n.d), 916.

[38] See Exodus 13:13 and the extended discussion in the first chapter of B.T *Bekhorot*.

[39] *Al-Muwaṭṭa', K. al-Jum`a* 16 (p.108).

Later, Abu Hurayra related this conversation to the early Jewish convert to Islam, Abdullah ibn Salām. "I told [Abdullah] that Ka`b said: 'This is [but] one day of the year.' Abdullah ibn Salām replied: 'Ka`b is lying!' I then told him that Ka`b consulted the Torah and agreed that it was every Friday. So Abdullah said: 'Ka`b is correct.' Abdullah then said: 'I know which time it is [that a Muslim will receive anything he requests from God].' [Abu Hurayra] said to him: 'So tell me and do not hold back.' So Abdullah ibn Salām said to him: 'It is the last hour of Friday.'"

This interchange raises a number of issues related to the intersection of customs and traditions between Judaism and early Islam. Ka`b's "one day of the year" may have referred to Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement and the most sacred day of the Jewish ritual calendar when Jews typically spend most of the day in intense prayer. Ka`b later revises his statement after "consulting the Torah," thereby agreeing with Muhammad's teaching. Abdullah becomes quite angry when hearing Ka`b's initial statement of what would appear to be the normative Jewish view, but is satisfied when learning that Ka`b revised his position, perhaps based on the famous Jewish tradition that many special and wondrous things were created at the last hour of the Friday of creation.[40] Because of such divine wonders associated with that hour, it could have been considered a particularly auspicious time for personal supplication.

This story of Ka`b, Abū Hurayra and Abdullah, with Muhammad's statement about the merits of Friday a constant referent, serves as an important foundation story to justify the Islamic weekly day of religious congregation on Friday, in juxtaposition to the Jewish Saturday or Christian Sunday. It is impossible to reconstruct what Ka`b was thinking or reading when he gave his view on Muhammad's wisdom as told him by Abu Hurayra, but the "Torah" that he consulted was certainly not the Five Books of Moses. It was, rather, the extended Jewish meaning of Torah as "Jewish learning," because the legend of the special creations on Friday afternoon are found only in the post-biblical interpretive literature of Midrash and Talmud. We also observe in this story about Ka`b al-Aḥbār how he had the temerity to question a statement of the Prophet, and how after consulting his Jewish sources, he was bold enough to say, "The Apostle of God is correct."

This story again raises the question whether it reflects a true historical occasion. We know that many Islamic traditions of this nature were fabricated, and it is possible that this was too. A number of factors, however, strongly suggest that its core indeed reflects history. The most striking is that the story depicts Ka`b as unwilling to accept the word of the prophet Muhammad without corroboration, and that he consults the Torah to confirm a prophetic statement. Such behaviors would never have been fabricated by Muslims, who, as we shall learn below, strongly criticize Ka`b for this in later generations.

According to Muslim historical tradition, Ka`b accompanied the caliph, Umar, northward into Palestine and Syria during the Arab conquests and was with him upon his first visit to Jerusalem. Ka`b, who is quite moved by his visit to Jerusalem, tells the caliph about a Jewish prophecy that Arabs would conquer Jerusalem from the Romans (which in Arabic parlance includes the Byzantine Roman Empire). His particular reverence for the holy city seems to have landed him in a bit of trouble, however, as the following story will demonstrate.

When the Arabs capture the city from the Byzantines, they discover that the site of the ancient Temple had been turned into the garbage dump of the city. This was fully in keeping with Byzantine Christian doctrine, which sought to demonstrate in history through its own imperial policies that the old divine covenant with the Jews was no longer valid after the appearance of Jesus. Henceforth, the only valid covenant would obtain with those who believe in the saving grace of Christ. As the primary symbol of ancient Judaism, the Temple and its environs were purposefully desecrated by the Byzantine authorities. Both Muslim and Jewish versions of the Arab conquest of the city depict the conquerors proceeding directly to the Temple Mount, which they thoroughly clean up. Umar himself is featured in many of these depictions as leading the clean-up efforts.

[40] Babylonian Talmud, *Pesahim* 54a. See Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* 1:83, 5:103.

Umar wanted to build a mosque on the Temple Mount, and asked Ka`b's advice. According to an early version of the story in the great universal history of Muhammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabari (d.923),[41] Umar asked him: "'Where do you think we should put the mosque?' 'By the rock,' answered Ka`b. 'By God, Ka`b,' said Umar, 'you are following after Judaism. I saw you take off your sandals.' 'I wanted to feel the touch of it with my bare feet,' said Ka`b. 'I saw you,' said Umar. 'But no. We will make the forepart the *qibla* [the direction of prayer], as the Prophet of God made the forepart of the mosques their *qibla*. Go along! We were not commanded concerning the rock, but we were commanded concerning the Ka`ba!'"

The rock here is the portion of bedrock that protrudes slightly from the surface of the level of the Temple Mount, known in the Mishnah (*Yoma* 5:2) as the "Foundation Stone" (*sh^{e}tīyāh*) upon which the Holy of Holies, the most sacred part of the Temple stood. When Ka`b entered the Temple Mount, he immediately removed his shoes, clearly in response to entering a holy place. As in the previous narrative, we must ask if removing his shoes was a *Jewish* act or a Muslim act. Whether removing his shoes reflected Jewish or Muslim practice, he was criticized by the caliph for doing it *there*, which clearly indicates a Jewish response to entering into the sacred area of the Temple.

The last part of this story is a bit confusing in this version, but becomes clearer in another rendering provided below. It should be clarified that the *qibla* is the direction of Islamic prayer and always faces toward the Ka`ba in Mecca, the most sacred and central religious shrine of Islam. From Jerusalem and its environs, the *qibla* or direction of Mecca is due south. There is evidence in the Qur'ān and early Islamic tradition, however, that the Islamic *qibla*, like the direction of Jewish prayer, was directed toward Jerusalem for a brief period when Muhammad first arrived in Medina. Shortly after his arrival, however, the direction of Islamic prayer was turned toward Mecca. The *qibla* controversy becomes clear in the following version of the story about Umar and Ka`b in Jerusalem.[42]

> ...the caliph himself went there, and Ka`b with him. Umar said to Ka`b: "O Abu Isḥāq, do you know the position of the Rock?" Ka`b answered: "Measure from the well which is in the Valley of Gehenna so and so many ells; there dig and you will discover it," adding, "at this present day it is a dungheap." So they dug there and the rock was laid bare. Then Umar said to Ka`b: "Where do you say we should place the sanctuary, or rather, the *qibla*?" Ka`b replied: "Lay out a place for it behind [that is, to the north of] the Rock and so you will make two *qibla*s: that, namely, of Moses and that of Muhammad." And Umar answered him: "You still lean toward the Jews, O Abu Isḥāq. The sanctuary will be in front [that is, to the south of] the Rock." Thus was the Mosque (of al-Aqsa) erected in the front part of the *Haram* (Temple Mount) area.

Ka`b is accused here of trying to insert Jewish religious ideas into Islam. Yet in the previous story associated with Ka`b, he is not criticized for confirming a statement of Muhammad by consulting the Torah, an act which could have been considered just as egregious as regarding the Temple Mount a sacred site. Ka`b even refers to the Torah as the Book of God, despite the fact that Islam does not consider the Torah an accurate divine revelation. Ka`b is depicted elsewhere as counseling Umar to refer to Jerusalem not as Aelia, the name applied to it by Hadrian in the second century in order to dissociate the holy city from its Jewish heritage, but as *Bayt al-Maqdis*, the exact Arabic equivalent to the Hebrew *Beyt Hamiqdash*, the common Jewish word for the Jerusalem Temple.

In another story about Ka`b told by Ibn `Abbās' student Ikrima,[43] a man comes to the great scholar and exegete, Ibn `Abbās, and says, "'O Ibn `Abbās, I heard something remarkable from

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[41] Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wal-mulūk*. Ed. M. J. De Goeje (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 1:2408-9, translation in Bernard Lewis, *Islam from the Prophet Muhammad to the Capture of Constantinople*, vol. 2 (NY: Harper, 1974), 3.

[42] F. E. Peters, *Jerusalem: The Holy City in the Eyes of Chroniclers, Visitors, Pilgrims, and Prophets* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 189.

[43] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh* 1:62-3, and translated in *The History of al-Tabari* vol. 1 (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 233.

Ka`b the *ḥabr* about the sun and the moon.' [Ibn `Abbās] had been reclining, but he sat upright and said, 'What is it?' [The man went on], 'He claims that the sun and the moon will be brought on the Day of Resurrection as if they were castrated bulls and thrown into hell.'[44] One of Ibn `Abbās' lips flew up in anger and the other dropped. Then he said three times, 'Ka`b lies! Ka`b lies! Ka`b lies! This is Judaism that he wants to insert into Islam! God is too great and honorable to punish the obedient. Have you not heard God's word [Q.14:33]: **He has made the sun and the moon work for you diligently**?'"

Ibn `Abbās continues to be agitated and upset after hearing what Ka`b said, and finally cites traditions on the authority of Muhammad himself that contradict Ka`b's teaching. Ikrima then decides to tell Ka`b about his teacher's strong reaction to his words.[45] "I got up with those who had been told [the story]. We came to Ka`b and told him Ibn `Abbās' reaction upon hearing [Ka`b's] statement and what he reported [in response] on the authority of the Apostle of God. So Ka`b arose and accompanied us to Ibn `Abbās. [Ka`b] said: 'I heard your reaction to my statement. I ask God's forgiveness and repent. I simply reported from a book of midrash that was in circulation.[46] I did not know that there were Jewish changes (*tabdīl al-yahūd*) in it....'"

Ka`b was actually citing a midrash containing material that would be considered outside of the parameters of normative rabbinic tradition. His final comment suggests, interestingly enough, that he may have ultimately realized that his book of midrash was expressing non-canonical Jewish views. From the standpoint of Islam, however, such distinctions were irrelevant (nor is it clear how fixed was the Jewish canon of midrashic literature in the seventh century). Ka`b is again condemned for attempting to insert "Jewish teachings" into Islam, yet we noted previously how Ka`b was not condemned in other traditions for doing exactly that. On the contrary, he was sought out by early Muslims exactly because he had access to ancient monotheistic lore that could lend insight into God's word and will as expressed in Islamic Scripture and tradition. Why was he so harshly condemned here and so welcomed in other contexts?

The definitive answer may never be known, but two aspects of Ka`b's situation provide significant clues. Although it was known to all that Ka`b was knowledgeable in Jewish tradition, the Jewish nature of his knowledge seemed to matter little if at all in his own lifetime during the earliest period of formative Islam. What was important was that he had access to ancient monotheistic wisdom, and he was consulted frequently for this by his Muslim colleagues. Because Islam was only in formation during Ka`b's lifetime in the mid-seventh century, it was not yet clear exactly where Islam fit in relation to Judaism and Christianity. Most of what would become Islamic dogma simply had not been established at this point. Ka`b, for example, could question and then find Jewish confirmation of Muhammad's statement about the status of Friday. Later, however, there developed the Islamic dogma that the word of the prophet was infallible, after which Ka`b's behavior could no longer be considered acceptable. In his own lifetime, however, Ka`b was regularly consulted for his access to divine wisdom. He, like other scholars of Holy Scriptures, even if Jewish or Christian, was consulted in this early period also for his ability to predict future events based on his knowledge of divine revelation. As Islamic thought and tradition began to crystallize in their own right, however, Ka`b and his wisdom were more likely to be criticized as being deviant from normative Islam.

More significant than this, however, is the fact that Ka`b's reputation declined in subsequent generations as Islam began increasingly to view itself as an independent religious civilization. Although one of the best known authorities in the first century of Islam, material attributed to Ka`b came to be considered tainted in the following centuries because of his unabashed association with Judaism. During this later period in the eighth and ninth centuries, emerging

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[44] *Thawrān `aqīrān*. See D. Halperin and G. Newby, "Two Castrated Bulls: A Study in the Haggadah of Ka`b al-Aḥbār," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 102.4 (1982), 631-37.

[45] Tabari, *Ta'rīkh* 1:74, translation 1:243.

[46] *Kitāb dāris*, which is generally translated as "well-worn book". Halperin and Newby correctly translate *dāris* through its meaning as study or reading, equal to the Hebrew *midrash*.

Islam served as the ideological basis of the largest and most successful empire of the age. Any hint of dependence or subordination to another tradition would have been considered at least unpolitic, and, given its political and religious position in relation to Jews and Christians, virtually unthinkable. Ka`b's traditions, therefore, became suspect and his reputation deteriorated. By the end of the eighth century, it became improper to consult Jews about problems of religion and belief. Ka`b is occasionally accused even of attempting to surreptitiously corrupt Islam from within by inserting foreign and un-Islamic ideas while masquerading as a convert.

One may detect the change in Ka`b's status by examining the sources of tradition in which he is cited by name. In the canonical Hadith, the most highly respected sources for Islamic tradition, Ka`b's name cannot be found. Many traditions that are attributed to him in extra-canonical literature, however, can be found also in the canonical Hadith collections, although they are attributed not to him but to his students. This can be explained by the fact that Ka`b's status was too tainted to be included in the Hadith by the time of its assembly in the ninth century. Some of the information he brought was too important to be excluded from it, however, so it is found attributed to students of his such as Ibn `Abbās, who is not tainted with being too closely associated with Judaism or other foreign religious traditions. Ka`b's stories and teachings may be found repeatedly in his own name, however, in the popular literature of the story-tellers or *quṣṣāṣ*, who told tales of ancient prophets and patriarchs. Reflecting popular culture that transcended religious affiliation, these "Stories of the Prophets" (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*) preserve much of the aggadic material for which Ka`b was famous.[47]

The story of Ka`b al-Aḥbār reflects aspects of Jewish culture and civilization of seventh century Arabia just as it reflects aspects of emerging Islam. The midrashic traditions Ka`b cites sometimes lie outside of the canon of Rabbinic Judaism that we know today, suggesting that the religious ideas and practices of ancient Arabian Jews may have been somewhat different from what we know from the Talmuds of Babylon and the Land of Israel. In fact, certain heterodox ideas of Arabian Judaism may have impacted the emergence of particular aspects of normative Islam, although there is no hard evidence to demonstrate the veracity of this suggestion. Whatever the relationship between Arabian Judaisms and emerging Islam, Ka`b, like most other Jews in the area, did not initially accept the religious legitimacy of the early Muslims. Yet he eventually did become a Muslim, just as most Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians of the Middle East would over the following centuries. Just as Ka`b *islamized*, however, so too did he partially *judaize* the very emerging Islam into which he assimilated. This phenomenon is not unique, of course, for scholars of religion have clearly established that religions continuously evolve, often absorbing aspects of the civilizations within and among which they exist. Proselytes often contribute something of their prior religious ideas and practices as they integrate into the systems of new religions.

In fact, the Islam that Ka`b knew must have looked quite different from later Islams. It was most certainly less distinct from his own Judaism than the distinctions with which we are familiar today. The boundaries between the emerging expressions of Islam and the Judaisms of the time were simply not so clear in the early period, as Muhammad's expectations that the Jews of Medina would follow him suggest. One tradition even states that a group of Jews who had embraced Islam asked Muhammad's permission to observe the Jewish Sabbath and to study the Torah at night, requests which were not granted.[48] Early Muslims came to Jews and Christians for monotheistic wisdom and lore that would help them understand their own revelation and the acts of their apostle, Muhammad. Ka`b's Jewish background, along with the Jewish and Christian and even Zoroastrian backgrounds of many hundreds of thousands of other early Muslim converts, therefore impacted the very religious civilization that the many converts chose to

[47] One of these collections has been translated into English by Wheeler Thackston, *The Tales of the Prophets of al-Kisā'ī* (Boston: Twayne, 1978). A great deal of this material may also be found in the first few volumes of the recently translated history of al-Ṭabarī (Albany: State University of New York, variable dates as volumes are translated).

[48] Kister, "*Ḥaddithū...*", 238.

accept. But as Islam developed and grew through the generations, and as its tenets and practices became more standardized and unified, it and its adherents saw themselves as more and more distinct, unique, and different from the religious civilizations among which it was birthed.

During Ka`b's long life in the sixth and seventh centuries, rabbinic Judaism itself was still emerging from the primordial soup of Late Antiquity. Although by Ka`b's lifetime Rabbinic Judaism was certainly the most powerful Jewish expression, its boundaries were still permeable. It had not yet become the virtual Jewish monopoly that it would be by the High Middle Ages. The legends and traditions found in early Islamic literature transmitted in Ka`b's name often do not reflect what would today be considered normative rabbinic Judaism. This may of course result from the natural continuing evolution of ideas and practices that occurred within an Islamic framework. Additionally, some of Ka`b's Jewish teachings found in Islamic religious literature may have since fallen out of Judaism because they became irrelevant and therefore forgotten, or because they came to be considered beyond the pale of acceptable Rabbanism and therefore rejected. In a fascinating reversal, however, some of Ka`b's and his other Islamized Jewish cohort's traditions as preserved in Islamic literature would begin to reappear in later Jewish literature when, by the tenth century, Jews in the Islamic world increasingly absorbed and appropriated aspects of the powerful and attractive Islamic religious, intellectual and cultural civilization.

Reading Suggestions

Arabic Sources in Translation:

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